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Follow-up to the Fourth World Conference on Women and to the special session of the General Assembly entitled "Women 2000: gender equality, development and peace for the twenty-first century"

Statement submitted by Women's National Commission, a non-governmental organization in consultative status with the Economic and Social Council

The Secretary-General has received the following statement, which is being circulated in accordance with paragraphs 36 and 37 of Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31 of 25 July 1996.

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Statement

The Women's National Commission (WNC) is the official independent advisory body giving the views of women throughout England, Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales to the UK Government. The WNC has over 400 partner organisations and individual partners drawn from women's voluntary and community groups and organisations, professional associations, trade unions and faith groups. In addition, we work with women's organisations in the European Union and UK-based international organisations.

The WNC believes that the critical areas of concern in the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action are inextricably linked with the articles in the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) and the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). Gender is a cross-cutting issue in international agreements, and gender equality is most effectively promoted by mainstreaming it through all areas of policy development.

The WNC recognises the initiatives of the UK Government, non-governmental organisations and civil society toward furthering gender equality in the UK. Below, we list some achievements made since the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing in 1995.

i. The UK Government acceding to the CEDAW Optional Protocol in December 2004.
ii. A number of new statutes around violence against women, including legislation on female genital mutilation, sexual offences and domestic violence, came into force. We appreciate the extensive consultation undertaken with civil society in the development of these laws.
iii. The Employment Act 2002, which gives all parents of children under the age of six the right to ask their employers for flexible working arrangements.
iv. The introduction of the Sex Discrimination (Election of Candidates) Act 2002, which assists political parties to use positive measures to reduce the inequality between numbers of men and women elected. Following elections in 2003, the number of women members in the Wales Assembly and the Scottish Parliament reached 50% and 39.5% respectively.
v. The establishment of a consultative Gender Expert Group on Trade to advise the UK Government on gender aspects of trade at UK, EU and international levels. Members of the Group represent experts from civil society and professional life, and academics.
vi. In Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales, the promotion of equality has been built into legislation, with a statutory duty placed on each administration to promote gender equality.

While we applaud the initiatives taken, much work remains outstanding in the 12 critical areas of concern in the Platform for Action in order to improve the lives of women living in the UK. Highlighted below are some serious and major barriers that women in the UK consider must be addressed in order for their lives, and those of other women around the world, to improve.

1. Women and poverty — Changes to the Social Security system to ensure women can access appropriate benefits and earn a decent pension are crucial to lifting them out of

poverty. Some of the women most affected by poverty are lone mothers and single pensioners, primarily due to caring responsibilities, part-time employment and employment in low-paid sectors. These women often experience problems accessing the services they most need following a lifetime of gender inequality, making them vulnerable in old age.

2. Education and training of women — Women must have access to training and mentoring to empower them to take the opportunities available. The introduction of compulsory gender-awareness education in schools will help tackle gender stereotyping. Girls are still in a minority of students studying science, engineering, and information and communications technology, and subsequently enter a gender-segregated labour market where they are a minority in manual trades, engineering and the like, making it important to encourage them into non-traditional subjects and careers to reduce gender inequalities.

3. Women and health — It is critical that all women in the UK are able to exercise control and choice over their sexual and reproductive health. In Northern Ireland, the law on the practice and provision of abortion has been unclear and restrictive, meaning that many women have been forced to travel to England and pay for an abortion in a private clinic, which they might lawfully have been entitled to under the National Health Service. Sexually transmitted infections and diseases are on the increase in the UK: the sexual health message needs to begin from a positive discussion of consent. More funding is required in health education and treatment. Institutional racism and discrimination and a lack of culturally appropriate services are of concern. For instance, it is known that women are over-represented among those with mental health problems, particularly those from black and minority ethnic communities.

4. Violence against women — A comprehensive, integrated national strategy to eliminate all forms of violence against women must be developed by the Government. Current Government initiatives are fragmented, ignoring the wider issues around violence against women and focusing on specific concerns such as domestic violence, prostitution, sex trafficking, female genital mutilation, forced marriage and other cultural practices which are harmful to women. No culture can justify violence against women. An integrated strategy would help protect and support women, and a significant increase in resources is badly needed.

5. Women and armed conflict — Although the UK is committed to United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325, funding and training is needed to implement it globally, and in Northern Ireland, in particular, peace-building initiatives are needed. The protection of women and girls against gender-based violence during and post conflict, for instance in Iraq, is paramount. Gender-awareness training and a commitment to developing monitoring processes to prevent involvement in sexual exploitation for UK military and peace-keeping missions are essential.

6. Women and the economy — Government statistics should be routinely gender disaggregated and economic indicators should include the value of unpaid work, and its significant contribution as social capital to the economy. Systematic gender impact assessments, particularly of the UK budget, must be undertaken. Targets must be set to ensure the gender pay gap, which still stands at 18%, is eradicated. Globalisation has brought an increase in the migration of labour, and with it an increase in the exploitation of women, such as those in the sex industry or as domestic workers. A strategy must be developed and resources released to ensure vulnerable girls and women are given appropriate support.

7. Women in power and decision-making — Funding of programmes and initiatives in order to achieve equal numbers of women in decision-making positions and public appointments is critical to achieving gender equality. Women's involvement at every level must be ensured.

8. Institutional mechanisms for the advancement of women — A Single Equality Act is needed to extend to women (and indeed, all groups in society) the rights that are currently only enjoyed by a few. Achieving gender equality must not be lost in the work of the Government's proposed Commission for Equality and Human Rights.

9. Human rights of women — The UK, as part of the EU, should promote the adoption of EU-wide enforceable gender guidelines for refugees. Women and children constitute some 80% of the world's refugees, and those fleeing gender-related persecution face particular obstacles in having their asylum claims recognised. Women and girls who are trafficked and smuggled into the UK are often treated as criminals by public services. They must be given the support and advice they need, including appropriate housing and counselling.

10. Women and the media — The press must stop publishing degrading images of women, as these encourage men and boys to view women and girls as objects rather than people. The current spread and accessibility of internet porn should also be challenged as it exacerbates the exploitation of women. Internet sites regularly use underage girls and trafficked women. Women and girls are often forced to have unprotected sex and participate in 'hardcore' and dangerous sex acts, images of which are made available on the internet, resulting in women experiencing abuse, torture and psychological trauma.

11. Women and the environment — Women must be involved in planning for public services as they are the primary users. In rural areas of the UK, public transport options are limited, leading to considerable isolation for many women, particularly older women and those with mobility difficulties.

12. The girl child — Education of teenage boys and girls on sexual and reproductive health is essential, as teenage pregnancy is a significant issue in the UK, which has one of the highest rates in Western Europe. An increase in services providing advice and support

specifically designed for adolescents and young adults on sexual and reproductive health is also much needed.

Although a great deal has been achieved in the UK during the last ten years, many challenges remain, and the primary responsibility for implementing the strategic objectives of the Platform for Action rests with the Government. The UK has an active civil society which plays an important part in taking the Platform for Action forward locally, nationally and internationally. The primary concern for UK non-governmental organisations is the lack of resources allocated to implement the Platform for Action. To this end, a gender perspective should be integrated into every Government budgetary decision on policies and programmes.

The Women's National Commission hopes that the next ten years sees significant progress in commitments made in the Platform for Action in Beijing. We urge Member States to reaffirm their commitment, and work together to improve the quality of life for women and girls throughout the world. Only the establishment of enforcement mechanisms will ensure implementation of the Platform for Action and advance the situation of women in the UK.